DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Hepatitis C

(Parenterally transmitted HCV infection)

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is the most common chronic blood borne infection in the United States. The hepatitis C virus invades the liver, causing inflammation that results in damage of the liver tissue. Hepatitis C accounts for the great majority of what was referred to in the past as non-A, non-B hepatitis. The hepatitis C virus was indentified in 1989 and a hepatitis C antibody test (anti-HCV) became available to identify individuals exposed to HCVin 1990. Most recent data indicate that approximately 3.9 million Americans have been infected with HCV. It is estimated that up to 85% of the people infected with the hepatitis C virus will develop chronic infection.

Who gets hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C occurs most often in people who have shared needles during intravenous drug abuse. Those that have received a blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to 1992 are also at risk for HCV; as are long term hemodialysis patients, infants born to HCV infected mothers, and people who have unprotected sex with multiple partners.

How is the virus spread?

Like hepatitis B, hepatitis C is spread by exposure to blood or blood tainted mucous membranes from an infected person.

What are the symptoms?

Most (80%) people who are infected with HCV have no signs or symptoms. If symptoms are present they are generally fatigue, jaundice, nausea, abdominal pain, and loss of appetite.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure but usually within two months.

When and for how long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

Some people carry the virus in their bloodstream and may remain contagious for years.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

Currently there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, but there are a few interferon and ribavirin based treatment protocols being employed to treat the disease with varying amounts of success.

Is donated blood treated for this virus?

Blood banks throughout the United States have been screening all potential donors with a specific test for hepatitis C since 1992. It is estimated that the risk of post-transfusion hepatitis C has been reduced to 0.001% per unit transfused.

How can the spread of hepatitis C be prevented?

People who have had hepatitis C should remain aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids are potentially infected. Care should be taken to avoid blood exposure to others by sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles, etc. In addition, infected people must not donate blood and should inform their dental or medical care providers so that proper precautions can be followed.